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ON SISTERHOODS AND VOWS.

1883

A LETTER

TO THE

VEN. SIR GEORGE PREVOST, BART.

BY

CHR. WORDSWORTH, D.D.

BISHOP OF LINCOLN.

SECOND EDITION,

WITH A REPLY TO THE REV. CANON CARTER.

LINCOLN, WILLIAMSON.

RIVINGTONS,

London, Oxford, and Cambridge.

1879.

Price One Shilling.

LONDON:
GILBERT AND RIVINGTON, PRINTERS,
ST. JOHN'S SQUARE.

ON SISTERHOODS AND VOWS.

MY DEAR SIR GEORGE,

WHEN some weeks ago you favoured me with a copy of the Report of the Committee—whose Chairman you were—of the Lower House of Convocation on Sisterhoods and Deaconesses, you accompanied it with a request for such remarks as might occur to me in reading it. Since that time, that Report has been discussed in an interesting debate in the Lower House, and a Joint Committee of both Houses of the Convocation of this Province has been appointed to suggest resolutions upon it.¹

The subject is one of much importance and intricacy; it demands careful consideration and study, and requires that statements with respect to it should be made with caution, clearness, and ac-

¹ The words of the resolution, moved by Sir George Prevost, and seconded by Canon Rawlinson (with a slight amendment by Canon Simmons), were as follows:—

“That their Lordships of the Upper House be humbly requested to direct their attention to the recognition and regulation of these Institutions by the Synods of the Church; and (if they should think good) to appoint, by his Grace’s authority, a Joint Committee to lay down the general principles upon which such recognition and regulation may be based.”

curacy. I should therefore feel some difficulty in dealing with it in the ordinary limits of a speech in Convocation; and I am thankful to be allowed to avail myself of the opportunity you have kindly offered me of expressing my thoughts upon it in writing. The subject is now more important, because it has been engaging the attention of the Sister Church of America in her last three General Conventions.

And first let me premise that I fully concur in the language of cordial sympathy and admiration with which the Report speaks of the self-devotion of those Christian women who are associated in Sisterhoods, and who have laboured earnestly in the cause of Christ and His Church.

It has been my happiness to have been connected with a Sisterhood since its foundation thirty years ago,—the Sisterhood of St. John the Evangelist,—which has now the charge of nursing the sick in two of the principal Hospitals in London,—King's College Hospital and Charing Cross Hospital; and the authorities of both those great institutions have borne honourable testimony to the services rendered by the Sisters of St. John's House in elevating the character of nurses, and in ministering to the sick and suffering. The work done by Sisterhoods in maintaining and advancing Christian Education, at home and abroad, and in other labours of Christian love, are entitled to grateful acknowledgment.

It is evident that their excellence and value in these and other respects suggest strong motives for the wise counsels and salutary warnings of your Committee, lest through any flaws or blemishes in their organization, or by any indiscretions or irregularities in their acts, their "good should be evil

spoken of," and their work be marred and hindered. Rather let us hope and pray that by the divine blessing on the deliberations of the Synod of this Province, in this grave matter, the cause of Sisterhoods may be strengthened and promoted, and their usefulness increased and consolidated.

In dealing with this subject the primary appeal must be to HOLY SCRIPTURE.

There can be no doubt that St. Paul speaks of celibacy as affording special advantages for holiness of life. He wishes that all men were like himself in that respect. But in doing so he never forgets what human nature is, and that different persons have different gifts from God (1 Cor. vii. 7; xii. 11: cf. Matt. xix. 11, 12). He condemns those who forbid to marry (1 Tim. iv. 3), he says that marriage is honourable in all (Heb. xiii. 4), he wills that younger women should marry (1 Tim. v. 14), he says, for reasons derived from human infirmity, "Let every man have his own wife, and every woman her own husband" (1 Cor. vii. 2).

This being the case, we find that the Apostle is very cautious in his directions with regard to the self-dedication of women to singleness of life. Though Widows may be supposed to have been chastened by sorrow, he will not allow them to be set apart by a vow of celibacy to the service of Christ and His Church, and be enrolled as such, till they have attained the age of sixty years² (1 Tim. v. 9).

² The age for a deaconess, by the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451, c. 15, was *forty years*; but in Cod. Theodos. de Episcopis Leg. 27, "Nulla nisi emensis *sexaginta annis secundum Apostoli præceptum ad diaconissarum consortium provehatur,"* see also *Ziegler de Diaconissis*; Wittenberg, 1678, pp. 351-6.

Some indeed have imagined (see the Postscript to this Letter) that St. Paul is here speaking of *alms-women*, to be *maintained* from the funds of the Church. No doubt these widows were entitled to maintenance from the Church, but it was because they gave themselves by voluntary dedication, to the service of the Church. This is clear from the context, where he commands the Bishop of Ephesus, St. Timothy, to reject *younger widows* who may offer themselves for such dedication: the reason given for this prohibition being that “when they have waxed wanton against Christ, *they will marry*,” or rather, they *wish to marry*,³ and incur severe sentence of censure by annulling their troth to Christ (1 Tim. v. 12).

It may, I conceive, be fairly argued, that since St. Paul commands that widows are not to be allowed by the Church to dedicate themselves by a vow of celibacy before they are sixty years of age, he would not have permitted the Church to impose upon young unmarried women a vow of celibacy, or have allowed them to take such a vow of celibacy in the presence of Bishops or Priests of the Church.

This conclusion appears to be confirmed by sub-Apostolic testimony. S. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and disciple of St. John says,⁴ “Do not

³ On this statement of St. Paul, see *S. Augustine* de sancta Virginitate, cap. 34, and de bono Viduitatis, cap. 12. Our English translation “*they will marry*” hardly suggests to the reader the true meaning of the original *γαμῆν θέλουσι*, “*nubere volunt*” (Vulg.), i.e. *they wish to marry*,—whether in fact they marry or no. The word “*damnation*” in our version (derived from the Vulgate here) is not to be understood according to the more modern and rigorous sense of it.

⁴ *S. Ignatius*, Fragment vi.

impose on any one the yoke of celibacy; for it is a perilous thing and hard to be kept, when it is laid on by constraint. Exhort young men to marry." He also says,⁵ "If any one is able to remain in holy celibacy, for the glory of the Lord of his flesh, let him so abide without boasting; if he boasts he perishes." And again,⁶ "Whoever says anything against the divine rules, even though he fasts and lives in celibacy, let him be deemed by thee to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, tearing the flock."

It seems that unmarried women were enrolled into the same Ecclesiastical order as widows, and probably at the same age, and were even sometimes styled *widows* on that account. S. Ignatius says in one of his Epistles, "I salute the *Virgins* who are called *widows*."⁷

This is confirmed by a passage of Tertullian, in the following century, who, though a rigid ascetic and no friend to marriage, expresses his great astonishment that a Virgin had been admitted (probably in some schismatical or heretical society) among the widows at the age of twenty years.⁸ He then mentions the rule of the Church that its widows should be sixty years of age, and he describes the functions of those who were engaged as such, in works of piety, mercy, and charity.

In the next age, Tertullian's follower, St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, says plainly that at that time (the first half of the third century) there were young unmarried women who devoted themselves

⁵ *S. Ignat.* ad Polyc. cap. 5.

⁶ *S. Ignatius*, Frag. ix.

⁷ *S. Ignat.* ad Smyrn., cap. 13. See Bishop Jacobson's notes on the passage.

⁸ *Tertullian*, de *Virginibus velandis*, cap. 9.

to labours of love, and who seemed to have an intention and purpose (*propositum*) of leading a single life;⁹ but he distinctly says that they were under no vow of celibacy, and were free to marry; and, in certain circumstances they were advised to do so.

“If,” says he,¹ “they have dedicated themselves faithfully to Christ, let them persevere in modesty and chastity, and so, in strength and stableness, let them hope for the reward of virginity. But if they are unwilling or unable to persevere, it is better for them to marry than to fall into the fire by their sins. Certainly let not them put any stumbling-block in the way of their brethren or sisters.” He evidently implies that their marriage would not cause offence. And as the learned Editor of S. Cyprian’s works, Bishop Fell, remarks in his notes on the passage, “They dedicated themselves to Christ by *purpose of mind* and public profession of virginity, but were not *bound by any vow*,” and the erudite French Roman-Catholic Editor Rigaltius agrees with the English Bishop in this opinion.

In the following ages of the Church, that is, in the latter part of the fourth century and during the fifth, a change took place in these respects. Social life at Rome (as S. Jerome shows) was dissolved. The Barbarians from the North-East, sweeping on in successive waves of inundation, overwhelmed Italy and Africa. Even in the days of S. Ambrose (A.D. 340—397) property and person

⁹ In those days, as the learned Roman Catholic writer *Thomasinus* observes (*de Antiq. Eccl. Discipl.*, Part I., lib. iii., vol. iii., p. 355), “*Frequentior intentio (virginitatis) quam professio aperta.*”

¹ *S. Cyprian*, *Epist. ad Pomponium*, p. 8, ed. Fell, Amst., 1691, a reprint of the Oxford edition of 1682.

were insecure, and the havoc made at the capture of Rome by the Goths (A.D. 410), and the desolation of Africa by the Vandals, are themes for lamentation and woe in the letters and other works of S. Jerome (A.D. 345—420) and S. Augustine (A.D. 354—430).

No wonder that on account of the then “present distress” (1 Cor. vii. 26) single life had special attractions for young women; and their parents would not be unwilling to encourage this profession. The cares of a family would press heavily upon those who were married, and the uncertainty and vicissitude of all earthly things, when at last Rome herself, the queen of the world,² became a captive, and sat in sackcloth and ashes, raised the eyes of the faithful upward to their heavenly King and to their eternal home.

The Bishop of Milan, S. Ambrose, had been the great preacher of celibacy in the West, and he was followed by S. Jerome and S. Augustine. The writings of these Fathers³ on this subject deserve careful attention; to which may be added the

² See *S. Jerome*, Epist. xvi., ad Principiam Virginem, p. 783.

³ *S. Ambrose*, de Virginibus, ad Marcellinam sororem, libri tres (tom. iii., pp. 224—249). De Viduis, liber unus, pp. 250—266, De Virginitate, pp. 267—288. De Institutione Virginis, liber unus, pp. 289—305. Exhortatio Virginitatis, pp. 306—322. De Lapsu Virginis, pp. 323—331.

S. Jerome, Epist. xviii. ad Eustochium de custodiâ Virginitatis, p. 27. Epist. xvii. ad Demetriadem de servandâ Virginitate, p. 784, tom. iv. ed. Paris, 1706.

S. Augustine, de bono Conjugali, vi. 542—570. De Sanctâ Virginitate, pp. 579—618, de bono Viduitatis, pp. 626—650, tom. vi. ed. Paris, 1837.

S. Basil, de verâ Virginitate, tom. iii. p. 589, ed. Paris, 1730. This Treatise was written in the fourth century; but not probably by S. Basil.

Treatise on Virginity, ascribed by some to S. Basil, in the East, the contemporary of S. Ambrose.

S. Ambrose inculcates the doctrine of St. Paul, that widows should not be enrolled as such in the service of the Church under a vow of celibacy till sixty years of age; and that younger widows should be refused⁴ as not qualified for the work; and S. Basil says,⁵ "If a widow (of the Church) who has passed her sixtieth year contracts a second marriage, she is to be excommunicated till she repents. But if we have admitted a widow into the roll *before that age*, it is not the woman's fault, if she marries, but ours." S. Ambrose says that Virginity is not to be imposed on any. "Virginitas non imponitur sed præponitur."⁶

The admission of the Virgins into the service of the Church was fenced by many safeguards. By the canons of some churches (even after the days of St. Ambrose) a Virgin could not be admitted before the age of forty.⁷ She could not be admitted by a Priest.⁸ The approval of the Bishop of the Diocese was requisite.⁹ The Bishop, not the abbess, was to have the oversight of them.¹ The Bishop was obliged to proceed in the matter with great caution and deliberation. He must

⁴ De Viduis, cap. 2. ⁵ S. Basil, Canon. ad Amphiloeh., Ep. 2.

⁶ Ibid., cap. 12. See also S. Augustine, de Sanctâ Virginitate, c. 30, "Non ex necessitate sed vestræ voluntatis."

⁷ Council of Saragossa, A.D. 418, Can. 8. This was passed unanimously, and so the Council of Agde, A.D. 506, Can. 19.

⁸ Council of Rouen, Can. 9.

⁹ Concil. Carthag. iii., Can. 36.

¹ Fifth Council of Arles, Can. 5, "The Bishop is to have the oversight of the Monasteries of the Virgins; and the Abbess must do nothing contrary to the rules."

examine into her character² and qualifications with scrupulous attention. He must inquire whether (pray remark this) *she would be under the safe custody of her mother*, and the grave attendance of companions. If such conditions as these were not satisfied, she was not to be received.

When she had been dedicated as a Virgin, she then became a spouse of Christ,³ and had renounced the world; her life was to be one of holy exercises, of rigid asceticism, of private seclusion. Her chamber was to be an oratory;⁴ she was to pass her days there in fasting and prayer, in singing psalms and hymns, in reading Holy Scripture; she was allowed to do some women's works; she was not permitted to leave⁵ the house, "*prodire domo nescia*," says S. Ambrose,⁶ unless to go to church; she was forbidden to converse with men, even with holy men;⁷ and with women, except her nearest relations.⁸ If the virgin had no parents, and could not dwell at home, she was consigned to the care of some grave matrons in a monastery, which she was never

² S. Ambrose, de Virginitate, cap 7.

³ "Immortali nupsisti Viro," says S. Ambrose, de Lapsu Virginis, c. 5.

⁴ S. Jerome, Epist. 98, ad Gaudentium, "*In cubiculo suo totas delicias habeat; discat memoriter psalterium; libros Salomonis, Evangelia, Apostolos et Prophetas sui cordis thesaurum faciat.*"

S. Ambrose, de Virginibus, iii. 15, and de Inst. Virg. cap. 16. S. Ambrose, Exhortat. cap. 9, "*Quaere Christum in cubiculo tuo,*" &c.

⁵ De Virgin. ii. 2.

⁶ De Inst. Virg. cap. 1, and Exhort. Virg. cap. 10. "Nullus sit tuus sine matre processus; ipsa quoque ad Ecclesiam processio rarior sit adolescentulis." S. Basil, de Virg. cap. 19.

⁷ S. Basil, de Virgin. cap. 37.

⁸ S. Ambrose, Exhort. Virg. cap. 10.

to leave,⁹ except for special reasons. No one had free access to her there¹ but the bishop,² and the priest who came to celebrate the offices of the Church.

Such was the condition of the Virgins of the Church in the latter part of the fourth century, and in the fifth and sixth centuries.

In addition to these cautionary measures, by which the Virgins of the Church were protected against opportunities of intercourse with men, and against temptation to break their vow of celibacy, any violation of that vow was denounced by the³ doctors of the Church in stern language, and was visited by the canons⁴ of the Church with severe penalties. Thus the Church in her motherly frankness and plainness of speech set the matter clearly before the eyes of fervid postulants, and doubtless deterred many from rashly taking a vow of celibacy.

If this system had been based on sound foundations of human nature and Holy Scripture, it must be confessed to have been a wise one. It had the merit of logical consistency. It exhorted virgins *not* to take a vow of celibacy unless they felt that they had the gift to keep it.⁵ It withdrew the

⁹ See *S. Basil*, *Epitimia Canonicarum*, ii. 530. *Concil. Trullan.* Can. 41.

¹ *Concil. Carthag.* i. 3.

² *S. Ambrose*, *de lapsu Virginis*, cap. 7. *Council of Epaon*, Can. 38. *Council of Rouen*, Can. 10.

³ *S. Basil*, *de Virgin.* caps. 39, 40, 42. *S. Ambrose*, *de lapsu Virg.* c. 5. *S. Epiphanius*, *Hæres.* c. 61. *S. Augustin*, *de bono Viduit.* cap. 9.

⁴ *Concil. Ancyran*, Can. 19. *Concil. Turon.* i. 6. *Concil. Venet.* Can. 4. *Concil. Valent.* i. 2. *Concil. Matiscon*, i. Can. 12. *Thomas-sinus*, *Ecl. Disc.*, tom. iv. p. 63.

⁵ *S. Augustine*, *de bono Viduit.* cap. 8. "Si non continent nubant, antequam continentiam profiteantur."

Virgins of the Church from temptation, it supplied them with means of grace to resist it, and it deterred them from yielding to it by authoritative alarms and solemn anathemas.

But although the system was thus fenced in on all sides, it was not successful. It seems to have often fostered spiritual pride.⁶ The lamentation of Fathers of the Church on cases of failure,⁷ their exhortations, even to professed virgins, to marry rather than to live the lives which some of them were tempted to do,⁸ and the frequent iterations of canonical censures on the breaches of the vow of celibacy, seem to prove that the taking of vows of celibacy by women on any other terms than those which had been enunciated by St. Paul (1 Tim. v. 9—12), and had been accepted by the Primitive Church, was dangerous in its tendency and disastrous in its results.

And now, my dear Sir George, let me be allowed to ask your indulgence while I attempt to apply these statements to the subject of your Report.

And first, with regard to the terms *Sister* and *Sisterhood*, as now used in the Church of England.

It must be candidly confessed that these words, as

⁶ See *S. Augustine*, de sanctâ Virginitate, caps. 34, 44, 45. The Council of Gangra, A.D. 362, gives salutary cautions against this temper of mind (Canons 1, 4, 9), and against the tendency to Manichæanism which disparaged Marriage. The wise language of the Bishops assembled in this Council deserves careful consideration at the present time.

⁷ See for example *S. Ambrose*, de lapsu Virginis, p. 323. *S. Jerome*, Epist. xciii., ad Sabinianum lapsum, p. 754.

⁸ See *S. Jerome*, ad Demetriad, Ep. xviii., "Sanctum Virginum propositum quarundam non benè agentium nomen infamat. Quibus aperte dicendum est, ut aut nubant, si se non possunt continere, aut contineant si nolunt nubere. See also *S. Epiphanius*, Hæres. 61.

at present employed among us, do not correspond to anything known to the Christian Church for a thousand years. I am not saying that those persons whom they represent are the worse on that account. Every age of the Church knows its own needs, and must endeavour to provide for them by special means, adapted to their peculiar character and circumstances.

But let us try to have clear ideas on the subject; and let us not confound things that are widely different, and let us not hastily apply ancient terms and ancient rules to modern inventions.

The word *Sisterhood* has no correlative in the terminology of the ancient Greek or Latin Church. It is unknown to both; it would not be possible to translate it by any word used by either. The ancient Church had its *Widows*, it had its *Virgins*, it had its *Deaconesses*, but it had *no Sisterhoods* in the modern sense of the term.

And what may we infer from this? Not that Sisterhoods are bad things; not that they may not be very excellent things; no, far from it; but that it is unreasonable to apply ancient regulations to them.

Let me illustrate my meaning by a pertinent example in a very grave and serious matter.

I infer from your Report to the Lower House of Convocation, that, in some English Sisterhoods, the Sisters at an early age are allowed to take vows of celibacy of perpetual obligation.⁹ This, I venture to think, is repugnant to the teaching of the Apostolic age, as seen in the writings of St. Paul; and it is not consistent with that of the next age of the Church, that of S. Ignatius, Tertullian,

⁹ "The final Vows are in some cases perpetual," Report, p. 6.

and S. Cyprian; and it is also at variance even with the precepts and practice of the most earnest advocates of celibacy, S. Ambrose, S. Basil, S. Jerome, and S. Augustine, in the fourth and fifth centuries. As to the last-named let me explain what I mean.

If young women in our English Sisterhoods were never admitted to take vows, and to be veiled by a Priest of the Church, but only by the Bishop of the Diocese, and not even by the Bishop, except after careful scrutiny and examination; and if, after she had taken a vow of celibacy, she were not allowed to go out of her own house, even to church, except under most careful custody; or if, not living at home but in the house of the Sisterhood, she were denied all intercourse with the external world, except in going to church, and even that under watchful guardianship; and if her friends and relatives were not freely admitted to visit her; if, in a word, she were carefully guarded in perfect privacy and strict seclusion, against all inducement to break her vow, or to attract others by the graces of her person and character; and if the Church in her Synods had warned her by solemn comminations against the breach of her vow, and against the consequences of such violation, *then* there would be indeed some analogy between the Virgins of the age of S. Ambrose, S. Jerome, and S. Augustine, and the English Sister of the nineteenth century; but *not otherwise*.

I frankly confess that when I read in your Report that vows of perpetual celibacy are allowed and encouraged in some English Sisterhoods, and when I know what blessings the Sisters diffuse by the

English liberty of their holy lives, in nursing the sick in Hospitals, and in the homes of the poor and fever-stricken, and in teaching young children in schools, and in other labours of love at home and abroad, as missionaries of the blessed Gospel, by their influence and example; and when I see that some of them travel by railways from place to place, and even present themselves at the houses of strangers, in great towns, to solicit offerings for their Sisterhoods, I cannot help saying to myself, What would S. Ambrose, S. Augustine, and S. Jerome have thought, and what would they have said to all this? What would they who sat in the Synods of the ancient Church have thought and said, if they were told at the same time that these youthful sisters, so free and so attractive, were under vows of perpetual celibacy?

To state briefly the inferences from all this. If our English Sisters are to be in harmony with the Apostolic and Sub-Apostolic age, let them not be allowed to take vows of celibacy till they are sixty years of age. If they prefer to live, as it were, in the fourth or fifth centuries, and to take vows of celibacy when they are young, let them not be allowed to go forth from their own homes, or let them be shut up in a cloister. But let them not do what your Report says that some of them are doing, that is, let them not take vows of celibacy at an early age and yet live in public, and appeal to Catholic Antiquity as an authority for what they do.

I have written thus freely, because with you and other members of your Committee, and with those excellent men who addressed the Lower House of Convocation in the recent debate on the subject, I

earnestly pray for the prosperity of English Sisterhoods, and because I am sure that by the divine blessing they will prosper, unless they injure and destroy themselves by ill-advised rules and indiscreet practices, which cannot plead any precedent from any age of the Church for a thousand years after Christ.

I ought perhaps to advert here to a class of women in the ancient Church who may be thought to bear some resemblance to our English Sisters, so far as freedom is concerned, and also as being dedicated by a Vow of Celibacy (I am not speaking of the Apostolic age, but of the fourth century)—I mean *Deaconesses*. These were consecrated by a solemn service to their work, and were very useful as ministers in the Christian Church, especially in the instruction of women, and in preparing them for Baptism and Confirmation, and in teaching of children, and in succouring the sick and needy.¹ But they did not live in communities or sisterhoods. It is remarkable that their case is rather a warning than an example to us, and thus it may be useful to us. They represented an attempt—such as is now made by some sisterhoods—to reconcile freedom of life with vows of celibacy; and the experiment failed. After a fair trial the office of Deaconess so constituted was suppressed, and canons were passed against its continuance, in the fifth and sixth centuries in the Western Church.²

¹ See the authorities in *Bingham*, Antiquities of the Church, book ii. chap. xxii. 1—13.

² First Council of Orange, Can. 26, A.D. 441, and Council of Epaon, Can. 21. Second Council of Orleans, Can. 18, A.D. 533. It failed through human frailty not able to bear it, "pro conditionis

I do not mean to say that an order of *Deacouesses* might not be constituted on *primitive Apostolic* principles, and do much good; I believe it might. Indeed, the experiment has been tried in our own age and country with much success.

I should be chargeable with a serious omission if I did not here refer to the celebrated institution founded by S. Vincent de Paul in the early part of the seventeenth century (A.D. 1633); the Sisters of Charity, now numbering 18,000 members, of whom 14,000 are natives of France.³

These Sisters (like our English Sisters) enjoy much liberty. In the words of their saintly founder, "Their only monastery is the house of the sick, their chapel is the parish church, their cloister is the street of the city or the ward of the hospital, their seclusion is obedience, their *grille* is the fear of God, their veil is holy modesty and meekness."

But let us consider what their constitution is. A good account of it is given by M. Collet in his interesting life of S. Vincent de Paul, published at Paris in 1818 (p. 42), who states that the Sisters take no vow at all till after five years' probation; and then they are allowed to take a vow *for a year*; and in an interesting volume,⁴ published in London in 1854, it is stated (p. 94), in the history of this celebrated Sisterhood, that "No external austerities were required, and *no Vows were taken beyond a year*." Again (p. 98), "The Sisters of S. Vincent de Paul hujus fragilitate," says the Council. Cp. *Thomassinus*, *Disciplin. Eccl.* vol. x. p. 78.

³ See *M. Guizot*, *Histoire de France*, tome iv. p. 85.

⁴ Entitled "Hospitals and Sisterhoods." London: Murray, 1854.

usually have no private means ; they live with the poor whom they serve ; they receive a small annual sum (12*l.* or 15*l.*) from the *Bureau de Bienfaisance* of any town in France that may wish for their services, or a small sum is granted them from the Mother-house. After admission they spend six months in their own dress, and then adopt that of the Order, and after five years' probation they are allowed to take the simple Vows, which are *only for one year*, and are *annually renewed on March 25th.* From time to time the Sisters return to the seminary to gain spiritual strength by a retreat of eight days for spiritual exercise of prayer and doctrinal instructions."

"Their constitution and rules were, in 1847, exactly the same as in St. Vincent's time " (p. 102). The " Filles de St. Geneviève " (founded 1636) take no Vows " (p. 106). The Order, therefore, of St. Vincent de Paul by its permanence, prosperity, and beneficent influence seems to supply direction and encouragement to us.

Whatever may be the value of other Roman Catholic Sisterhoods, conducted on a much stricter plan, and which may exist more easily in conjunction with a clergy bound to celibacy, it can hardly be doubted that England would suffer much, both socially, morally, and spiritually, if she were to purchase such institutions, with their vows of perpetual celibacy, at the cost of her own Sisters of Mercy and Charity, namely, the wives and daughters of her Parochial Clergy in all parts of the land.

I do not see in the Report any reference to other Vows, such as Vows of *Obedience* and *Poverty*, which

are taken in some religious communities; nor do I know on what terms they are proposed and taken in English Sisterhoods.

But it may be well to observe that, according to the Will and Word of God, no Vow can be rightly imposed or safely taken, which interferes with or contravenes any religious and moral obligation by which the person taking the Vow was *previously bound*.

And in the present case no Vow of Obedience to a Superior of a Sisterhood can be defended which militates against any clear duty to God or to Parents.

And no Vow of Poverty can be justified which interferes with the duties of piety to God (such as almsgiving) or to Parents. Such Vows are condemned by our Lord (Matt. xv. 5. Mark vii. 11), and by St. Paul (1 Tim. v. 8). On this subject let me refer to the excellent remarks of Bishop Sanderson in his Lectures on the Obligation of an Oath, and in his Cases of Conscience; especially Case iv. and Case viii.⁵

It may perhaps be alleged here that the foregoing observations are not of a constructive character, and are not suggestive of measures to be adopted for the regulation of existing Sisterhoods.

I anticipate this objection; but let me say also that if I entered on this part of the subject, I might be encroaching on the functions of the Joint Committee which has now been appointed for this

⁵ The "Lectures" will be found in vol. iv., the "Cases of Conscience" in vol. v. of Bishop Jacobson's edition of *Sanderson's Works*. Oxford, 1854.

purpose. At the risk, however, of appearing to do so, I would briefly offer one or two suggestions:—

(1.) That the general fundamental principles for the regulation of Sisterhoods should not be laid down by any Diocesan authority, but by the Provincial Synods of the Church.

(2.) That the application of those regulations in any Diocese should be entrusted to the Bishop of the Diocese.

(3.) That no vows of perpetual celibacy should be imposed; and that St. Paul's command (1 Tim. v. 9, see above, page 5) be complied with.

(4.) That a *promise* (not a Vow⁶) of self-dedication to the work might be made, but ought to be terminable, and not be extended beyond two or three years; and be renewable from time to time. And this being not a *Vow to God*, but a *promise to a human authority*, might, if circumstances so require, be relaxed by that authority.

There is much to be said in favour of a free, life-long, self-dedication to the work of a Sister. Such voluntary consecration of the whole being gives strength, and consistency, and stability to the Sisterhood. But there is also much to be urged in behalf of terminable engagements. There can be no better training for a wife and a mother than the work of a Sister, nursing in a hospital, or teaching in a good school. In one Sisterhood in London (St. John's) there have been and are a considerable number of "Lady Pupils," and very useful they are and will be. And it seems desirable for some young women, especially the daughters of the clergy, to

⁶ On the difference between a *Vow* and a *Promise*, see *Bishop Sanderson*, de juram. oblig., lecture vii.

have the advantage of two or three years' training as Sisters in a hospital, or in some well-ordered school, under efficient and skilful teachers.

(5.) That no one should be allowed to take any Vow except in the presence of the Bishop, and with solemn prayer and benediction from him.

(6.) That no Books of Devotion should be used in a Sisterhood without the knowledge and approval of the Bishop.

(7.) That all admissions to the Sisterhood should be with a religious service and celebration of the Holy Communion, and in the presence of the Bishop.

(8.) That great care should be taken in the appointment of the Chaplain of the Sisterhood. More will depend for success on the personal zeal, faith, wisdom, and holiness of those who are engaged in the work, and of those laymen who are officially connected with it (whether Members of Council or others) than in any abstract regulations.

And now, my dear Sir George, before I bring these remarks to a close, may I say something on the case of Sisters who in early years have taken a Vow of Celibacy, and may perhaps feel that they have been entangled by them, without fully counting the cost.

Let it then be remembered here that—

(1.) A Vow is a solemn act of religious worship done to Almighty God.⁷ A Vow ought never to be taken except with a feeling of solemn awe, inspired by a

⁷ See *Bishop Sanderson*, de juramenti obligatione, Prælect. vii., "Case of unlawful love," p. 13. His "Case of a Rash Vow," p. 118.

sense of His omnipresence, omniscience and majesty; a consideration (let me observe) which ought to deter persons from hastily making vows of *total abstinence*, and, still more, from imposing them on others.

(2.) The *matter* of a Vow ought to be something good, pious, charitable, and holy. Almighty God, in Holy Scripture, warns men against making rash vows; at the same time He commands them to keep the vows which they have made (Eccles. v. 4—6); unless they were not free to make them (Numb. xxx. 3—7. Deut. xxiii. 21), and unless the vows are contrary to some moral obligation by which they were previously bound.⁸

(3.) The *purpose* of a life of celibacy in dependence on God's grace, and for the promoting His glory and the good of His Church, is holy and commendable; but it is not lawful to *impose* a Vow of Celibacy on any, especially on young persons. (1 Tim. iv. 3; v. 9. 1 Cor. vii. 2.)

(4.) It is a rash thing to take such a vow. Bishop Taylor's words deserve careful attention:⁹—“*That man vows foolishly that binds himself for ever to the profession of what he may afterwards find not to be useful, or not profitable; but of some danger or of no necessity.*” He recommends that vows should rather be made for the performance of *special acts*, than for *continuance* in a *permanent state*.

Let me here observe in passing, that some

⁸ Cp. *Bishop Jeremy Taylor*, Ductor Dubitantium, book iii. chap. v. rule viii.

⁹ Cp. *Bishop Jeremy Taylor*, Holy Living, sect. vii., “Cautions for making Vows,” vol. iv. p. 225, ed. Heber, 1828.

have endeavoured to justify the taking of a Vow of celibacy by young persons, and even the imposition of it upon them, by examples of vows in the Old Testament, such as the Nazarite Vow (Numb. vi.), or the case of the Rechabites (Jer. xxxv.), or the Vow of Marriage under the Gospel, or the Vow at Ordination, or the Baptismal Vow.

But the cases are by no means similar.

In the Old Testament the Vow of the Nazarite was one of Divine institution (Numb. vi.), it was *not* imposed on any one, and as far as appears from Scripture, it was not of perpetual obligation; and God, who instituted it, would endue those whom He directed to take it, with strength to keep it. Besides the *matter* of it was in no way contrariant to human nature, which is God's work. There was also a provision for the contingency of a breach of it, by way of dispensation (Numb. vi. 12).

But a Vow of Perpetual Celibacy has no warrant from God; rather it is repugnant to His will as manifested in nature and revealed in Scripture, and cannot look with assurance for the help of His grace to keep it.

The abstinence of the Rechabites (Jer. xxxv.) was no consequence of any Vow. Jonadab, the son of Rechab, is not praised or approved for laying the commands he did on his descendants (rather he was censurable for doing so), but *they are commended* for showing reverence to God, Whose command it is that parents should be obeyed, and for showing love and honour to their father, and for their obedience to his command, although it is very doubtful whether the command ought to have been given.

In the Gospel dispensation Marriage has become

a “magnum sacramentum,” a great mystery (Eph. v. 32), and the marriage vow is approved by God as being a solemn promise in His sight to keep that troth which is necessary for the well-being of that estate which was instituted by Him in Paradise and has been consecrated by Christ. And (to those who pray for it) grace is given by Him to keep that vow.

In like manner the Episcopate, Priesthood, and Diaconate are holy states of life, instituted by God Himself, for His glory, and the good of His Church; and they who are admitted to those holy states may expect grace from Him to help them to keep the Vows which they take at their admission to them; just as all baptized persons may expect God’s grace, if they pray for it, to keep the vows they made when they were admitted into Christ’s Church by the Holy Sacrament of Baptism, instituted by Him. But these things cannot be rightly predicated concerning a Vow of Celibacy. As we have seen, celibacy is not a state appointed to any one by command of God; and to impose on any one a vow of celibacy, and to take a Vow of celibacy in early life, is repugnant to His Will and Word.

(5) But it does not follow as a necessary consequence that, because a Vow ought not to have been imposed or taken, it ought not to be kept.

If indeed it be a Vow to *do what is evil*, or may prove to be evil, like the vow of Micah’s mother to make a molten image (Judges xvii. 3), or like the vow of David to kill Nabal (1 Sam. xxv. 22), or like the promise of Solomon not to deny his mother anything that she might ask (1 Kings ii. 19—25), or like the vow of the Israelitish women in Egypt to

burn incense to the queen of heaven (Jer. xlv. 25), or like the oath of Herod to give the daughter of Herodias whatever she might desire (Matt. xiv. 7—8), or of the Jews to kill Paul (Acts xxiii. 12—15), or in later days in our own country the vow of the Countess of Shrewsbury to answer no questions put to her in the Star Chamber;¹ or like the Solemn League and Covenant which the English Parliament, at the Restoration, in the Act of Uniformity, required men to abjure—in such cases the vow ought never to have been made, and ought not to be kept. “*Dissolve vinculum iniquitatis,*” “*Rei illicitae nulla obligatio,*” are sound maxims.

But though a Vow of Celibacy is a rash thing, *celibacy itself* is not an evil thing, it is rather represented in Scripture as a good thing; though there may have been sin in taking the Vow of Celibacy, still, if it has been taken, ought it not to be kept? And to apply this to the cases in point, Ought a Vow of Celibacy, taken in an English Sisterhood, as now constituted, to be regarded as of perpetual obligation?

This is a difficult question, and depends much on the circumstances of the case.

If the vow has been made, according to the canons of the Ancient Church,² that is to say in the presence, *not* of a *Priest*, but of *the Bishop of the Diocese*, and with his full knowledge and sanction, and after careful examination by him, and with solemn previous warning of the consequences

¹ See the case which gave rise to the excellent speech of *Bishop Andrewes* “concerning Vows,” in his *Opuscula*, p. 79; he lays down as an axiom, p. 85, “*Non debet voveri Deo, quod displicet Deo; quod sibi persolvi non vult, voveri Deus non vult.*”

² See above, page 10.

of breaking it; and *if*, according to the canons of the Church, the person taking the Vow has been carefully shielded against temptations to break it, by religious privacy and seclusion, then the obligation to keep it seems to become more stringent.

But if these rules of the ancient Church have not been observed, then, in the words of St. Basil, the fault of the breach is not so much with the breaker of the vow, as with the breakers³ of the laws of the Church who have imposed the vow.

But as it seems to me (I speak with great diffidence) no general rule can be given; but each case must be considered by itself; and the question ought not to be determined by the person or persons principally concerned, who may be swayed by private bias, but by their Spiritual Superior, who would, I suppose, be guided in his decision by the judicious words of Bishop Sanderson,⁴ “An Oath cannot be remitted without the consent of all parties; but the case of a *Vow* is not precisely the same as that of an Oath. In a *Vow*, since it is made to *God* alone, some liberty may perhaps be granted to the person who has taken it, of *changing* the same into another which may be *evidently better*, and more acceptable unto God, there being nothing in this change that is injurious to a third person.”

But it will be safer to refer the matter to a wise, learned, and holy spiritual guide; and in no case

³ See above, page 10. And in a similar tone the Emperor Leo, in Theodos. Novell. 8, “Neque enim sacrilega judicanda est, quæ se hoc ante noluisse, aut certè non posse complere, appetiti conjugii honestate prodiderit.

⁴ De obligatione Juramenti, Prælect. vii. 5. Some directions as to the dispensation of Laws may be seen in *Bishop Jeremy Taylor's Ductor Dubitantium*, book iii. chap. vi.

ought a Vow, however rash, to be loosed by dispensation, without penitential sorrow and humiliation on the part of the person who has taken it.

Heartily wishing you success in your endeavours on behalf of the Sisterhoods of the Church of England,

I am, my dear Sir George,

Yours very sincerely,

C. LINCOLN.

RISEHOLME, LINCOLN.

June 1st, 1878.

P.S.—Since this letter was written some remarks have been made upon it in a pamphlet entitled, “Are Vows of Celibacy in early life inconsistent with the Word of God?” by a person whose name cannot be mentioned by me without feelings of respect—the Rev. Canon Carter, Rector of Clewer.

I do not find anything in those remarks to induce me to make any alterations in my letter. Canon Carter seems to suppose that the widows mentioned in 1 Tim. v. 9 were alms-women, and that St. Paul’s directions “evidently refer to the widow’s pecuniary support, which is thus shown to be the main object in view” (p. 10). He does not indeed deny that she was bound to render service to the Church.

But it seems to me to be clear, from the context, that St. Paul is speaking of reception of widows by the Church after a vow of self-dedication to its service. His words to the Bishop of Ephesus, St. Timothy, are (1 Tim. v. 9): “Let not a widow be taken into the number (let her not be enrolled, *μὴ καταλεγέσθω*), under threescore years old.” . . .

And what follows? “But younger widows refuse, for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they desire to marry (*γαμεῖν θέλουσι*), having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith,” or plighted troth to Christ,—“I will, therefore, that younger women marry.” Evidently the elder widows (not under threescore) are contrasted with the younger. It is a question of age. The elder (not under sixty years of age) may be placed on the roll of the Church, and may be permitted to make a vow of permanent self-dedication. And why? because, on account of their age, they would not be like the *younger*, “who wish to marry,” and break their vow of celibacy, and incur censure as untrue to Christ; and who, therefore, ought *not* to be admitted to take a vow of perpetual celibacy.

If it had been a question of the enrolment of alms-women by the Church, the Marriage of such women would not have been objectionable, but rather have been desirable, inasmuch as the burden of maintaining them would have been transferred from the Church to their husbands.

I therefore still adhere to my opinion, and agree with the best commentators (such as S. Jerome, S. Chrysostom, Epiphanius, and others quoted by Cornelius Lapidé; and with Chemnitius, *Examen Concil. Trident. Sess. viii. de Cœlibatu, cap. ix.*), that St. Paul is speaking of an enrolment of a widow in the service of the Church by a vow of celibacy.

I also argue (with the best expositors) that, if St. Paul would not have allowed a widow to be received by the Church with a vow of celibacy, under sixty years of age, he would not have sanctioned the reception of women “in early age” by a vow of

celibacy, which Canon Carter approves and affirms to be agreeable to God's Word.

Mr. Carter disclaims any wish to *impose* vows of celibacy (p. 4); he disapproves such a proceeding. But may I be allowed to ask, whether there is not something like a *moral pressure* and *coercion* exercised on the minds of the Sisters in some Sisterhoods, by eulogizing celibacy as a far higher spiritual state than marriage, and by disparaging marriage in comparison with it, and by representing a Sister who has married as having fallen from a higher state to a lower condition, and as almost under a ban?

Canon Carter also contends that a dedication contemplated by a young woman was in fact regarded in ancient times as *tantamount to a vow* (p. 18); and again (p. 24) he says, that "the dedication to a state of celibacy, whether expressed or *implied*, or however expressed, was regarded as *tantamount to a vow*."

He considers the purpose of celibacy as equivalent to a vow. I cannot agree with him in this. A young woman of ardent temperament, after hearing a stirring address from some eloquent preacher speaking of the "higher life," and dwelling on the merit of celibacy, may not unnaturally feel a desire, and entertain a design, of a single life. But is this "tantamount to a vow?" A vow is a very solemn thing; it is an act of worship of God; and when it has been made, it cannot lightly be unmade.

Holy Scripture says (Num. xxx. 3): "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth." And again (Deut. xxiii. 21—23): "When thou shalt vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it;

for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform." And therefore the wise man says (Eccl. v. 4, 5): "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools; pay that which thou hast vowed. Better it is that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay."

But an intention is a very different thing. It may be even right to alter it under a change of circumstances; and, therefore, in a passage quoted above (p. 8), St. Cyprian distinguishes between a vow of celibacy and a purpose of single life. A young woman may entertain a desire, and form a design, of celibacy, under certain circumstances. But are the desire and the design, under those circumstances, to be regarded as having irrevocably fixed her condition for the future, and as having indissolubly rivetted her in celibacy for the rest of her life, however her circumstances may change, which are beyond her cognizance and control, and are known only to God, and which are in His hands? Would not this be to say that she has been arrogating to herself His attributes? And if, under a change of circumstances, which are God's dealings with her, she modifies her desires, and shapes afresh her designs, is she to be regarded as *guilty of the sin of breaking a vow*, and as having incurred the penalties which Holy Scripture pronounce against those who commit that sin? Surely this would be a hard saying; and it is to be desired that the excellent author of the pamphlet may be induced to reconsider it.

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